

All Music is Political

Tiziana Rinaldi Castro (February 17, 2014)



Once again on music, politics, culture, and life in New York. But also on the Sanremo Festival—for decades the platform for main-stream music in Italy. Pagani is directing it for the second year in a row, and we want to know why. "As we used to say, the quality of everything one does is political, so music is always political in that it has a political effect. An ugly song is a 'carrier' of subculture whereas a good song is the opposite, so the only way to be positive in music is to produce beautiful songs."

This time, meeting over dinner in Brooklyn, I started by engaging the Maestro on the difference between making music today and forty years ago, and the opportunities for young musicians today.

Let's talk about being a young artist yesterday versus being a young artist today. What do you think are the main differences between your experience starting out and what today's young musicians have to face?

For thirty years, between the Fifties and the Eighties, music in the western world has been the boat fording the river of dreams for young people. Music used to be listened to religiously. People would buy vinyl and CDs with a sense of urgency and pride. The power it had and the power it fostered in younger generations was real, it had a tremendous transformative power on a personal level and, consequently, on a social level too. Today music competes with the web, the internet, and so much more. The media conditions what kind of music is produced and how it's produced, for music is used to generate audiences. If one wants to circulate one's own music, one has to adjust to that reality and modify one's sound, one's content, one's style according to that model. Young people have a commercialized relationship with music. A much larger percentage than before wants to make music in order to achieve success. And if they don't want to do that, well, it's a hard struggle.



In your early twenties you co-founded the legendary progressive rock band PFM (Premiata Forneria Marconi), which gained international renown. The band was staunchly political—leftist—and became a touchstone for a generation of young people in Italy.

Yes. Music was political, as all forms of art were then. Really, though, art is always a clear reflection of its time. Throughout history there have been times when songs have become cultural and political hymns, when they have stopped being songs. In those cases,

the content becomes more important than the music. As we were saying, the quality of everything one does is political, so music is always political in that it has a political effect. An ugly song is a “carrier” of subculture whereas a good song is the opposite, so the only way to be positive in music is to produce beautiful songs.

Do you feel that the political militancy of young people has changed too?

Today young people are terrified by politics in the traditional sense of the word. When I was young the word politics was a noble word. Today it’s an insult. Those of us in PFM didn’t want to become hymn writers, and yet clearly we were extremely political. One of the band’s great merits was to organize thousands of concerts and musical gatherings. This was great, but also exceptional; its power has never been repeated. Let’s hope politics evolves positively. We can’t expect a song to improve politics, but good songs with great content can and will raise people’s social and political awareness.

It’s difficult for people outside of Italy to understand the Sanremo Festival. It’s a platform for musicians to launch their careers, yet for decades it has also supported mainstream music in Italy. Why did you agree to direct it?

It has been a great professional challenge; it has pushed me to the limits of my professional abilities and competencies. I have to arrange (and conduct) music for a fifty-six member orchestra. That’s no small feat. It’s a big responsibility and a wonderful chance to learn something new. It would be too easy to say no. If we complain that things aren’t as they should be, shouldn’t we accept the responsibility to be the ones to change them? There is little space for music, and the Sanremo Festival is the one platform for people to launch original songs. It’s a competition between professional singers rather than amateur interpreters of other people’s hits, unlike on today’s talent shows. I think we should defend it; it’s one of the few occasions when the entire country is involved in a conversation about music for a whole week— in coffee shops, at home, at work. Sanremo rekindles people’s interest in music, it’s a cultural asset that we must protect. I think it would be best to focus our attention and energy on creating a really quality event.

Mauro Pagani is a musician, composer, violinist and one of the founding members of the progressive 1970s rock band Premiata Forneria Marconi. A leading voice in Italian music, he directed the popular Festival of Sanremo in 2013 and will again this coming spring. He has won numerous prizes for his film soundtracks and is also a writer currently working on his second novel.

Tiziana Rinaldi Castro lives in Brooklyn. She is a novelist, poet, and journalist from Italy. She teaches ancient Greek literature at Montclair State University.



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